Militarized Masculinities and Gendered Security Narratives in the U.S.A/Israel and Iran Crisis

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Abstract
This study examines the role of gendered security narratives and militarised masculinities in the contemporary U.S./Israel and Iran crisis, highlighting how discourse shapes public perception, state legitimacy, and conflict escalation. Drawing on Feminist International Relations theory and the concept of militarised masculinity (Connell, 1995; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015), the study employs qualitative critical discourse analysis of official speeches, policy documents, and media coverage from February 2023 to March 2024. Findings reveal that leaders across all three states consistently construct national security as a masculine responsibility, positioning men as protectors and women and children as symbolically vulnerable. These gendered narratives legitimise military action, frame restraint as weakness, and constrain alternative security approaches, illustrating a cross-national convergence in the performative use of masculinity. The study contributes to feminist security scholarship by demonstrating how militarised masculinities are operationalised in ongoing geopolitical crises and offers policy implications for integrating gender-sensitive analysis, promoting inclusive decision-making, and fostering alternative, human-centred security frameworks.

Keywords: *Militarized masculinity; gendered security narratives; feminist IR; U.S.–Israel–Iran crisis; discourse analysis; conflict escalation*

Introduction

The intensification of hostilities among the United States, Israel, and Iran has renewed global concern over the stability of the Middle East security order. Although tensions between these actors are longstanding, ranging from the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 to the targeted killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in 2020 (Katzman, 2023), recent political and military developments following the October 2023 Gaza escalation have deepened direct and proxy confrontations across the region. These clashes have reverberated across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Red Sea, reshaping regional diplomacy and military postures (International Crisis Group, 2024; Katzman, 2023). While mainstream analyses emphasize deterrence, nuclear capability, alliance politics, and balance-of-power calculations, far less attention has been devoted to the gendered dimensions of security discourse that animate and legitimize these confrontations. Feminist international relations (IR) scholarship has long argued that global politics is structured through gendered hierarchies in which masculinity is associated with rationality, strength, autonomy, and militarized protection (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2014).

The concept of militarized masculinity, deeply influenced by the work of Raewyn Connell (1995) and later adapted within security studies describes how State authority is performed through narratives of toughness, retaliation, and dominance. Similarly, Carol Cohn (1987) demonstrated how defense discourse relies on techno-strategic language that normalizes violence while obscuring its human consequences. Recent scholarship has further stressed that contemporary geopolitical crises increasingly draw on gendered scripts to legitimize the use of force, shaping audiences' emotional responses and narrowing the range of perceived policy options (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015; Sharp, 2021).

Following the October 2023 Gaza escalation and subsequent regional spillovers, official statements from Washington, Tehran, and Jerusalem have invoked themes of protection, deterrence, and moral strength (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023; Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023; Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Such rhetoric reflects what feminist scholars identify as the "protector/protected" binary, wherein the State is cast as a masculine guardian responsible for defending vulnerable populations, often symbolically portrayed as women and children against existential threats (Enloe, 2014; Young, 2003). This framing renders military retaliation not merely strategic but ethically necessary. Within this discursive field, compromise may be interpreted as weakness, while escalation is coded as resolve, mirroring patterns found in other major security crises such as the post-9/11 U.S. homeland security discourse (Parashar, 2015). Consequently, this article argues that the contemporary U.S./Israel and Iran crisis is sustained not only by material capabilities and geopolitical rivalry but also by gendered security narratives that privilege militarized masculinity as the dominant grammar of legitimacy. Despite ideological differences, adversarial States reproduce similar performative repertoires: strength over vulnerability, retaliation over restraint, and sovereignty as inviolable honor. Such convergence resonates with broader feminist critiques of militarism, which contend that masculinized security narratives are deeply embedded in institutional structures and cultural expectations (Enloe, 2000; Sjoberg, 2013). Moreover, recent work on the politics of fear suggests that gendered language amplifies threat perception and constrains democratic oversight of military action (Bleiker et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2020).

By foregrounding gender, this study makes three interventions; first, it extends feminist security scholarship into the empirical terrain of post-2023 Middle East escalation. Second, it demonstrates that rival States may share common gendered discursive structures even while positioned as enemies. Third, it highlights how women are frequently mobilized symbolically as victims in need of protection yet remains structurally marginalized in high-level security decision-making despite global commitments under the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda established in 2000 through UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This tension echoes broader debates in feminist geopolitics about the gap between normative commitments to gender inclusion and actual policy practice in conflict settings (Hudson et al., 2019). Understanding the U.S./Israel and Iran crisis through the lens of militarized masculinities therefore challenges purely realist interpretations of security politics. It underscores that war-making is not only about weapons and alliances, but also about identity performance, symbolic authority, and narrative power. By interrogating the gendered architecture of security discourse, this article opens space for rethinking how alternative, less militarized conceptions of security might emerge in one of the world's most volatile geopolitical arenas. This paper argues that militarized masculinity functions as a recurring discursive resource through which state actors construct authority, mobilize civilian vulnerability, and legitimize coercive responses during the U.S./Israel–Iran crisis. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and theoretical

framework; Section 3 explains the methodology; Section 4 presents the results; Section 5 discusses the findings and their implications; and Section 6 concludes with recommendations and limitations.

Statement of the Problem

The contemporary U.S./Israel and Iran crisis represents not only a geopolitical flashpoint but also a significant site for examining how gendered narratives shape conflict dynamics. While the crisis has been widely analyzed in terms of military strategy, nuclear deterrence, and regional alliances (Katzman, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024), few studies interrogate the ways in which State and media discourses construct and reinforce militarized masculinities to legitimize escalation. Scholars such as Connell (1995), Sjoberg and Gentry (2015) have shown that militarized masculinity frames the State as a rational, protective agent while symbolically casting civilians, particularly women and children as vulnerable. Although this conceptual framework is robust, it has been insufficiently applied to contemporary Middle East crises, particularly the ongoing U.S./Israel and Iran tensions, leaving a critical gap in understanding how gendered security narratives shape both public consent and policy options.

Furthermore, feminist security scholarship critiques the dominant realist focus on material power, highlighting that traditional analyses often neglect the discursive and symbolic mechanisms of militarization (Enloe, 2000; Cohn, 1987). For example, the "protector/protected" binary naturalizes violent responses while marginalizing non-militarized approaches to security, such as diplomacy or human security. Recent studies of post-9/11 U.S. security discourse (Parashar, 2015) and Middle Eastern militarized narratives (Shepherd, 2020) demonstrate that gendered rhetoric both legitimizes aggression and constrains alternative policy avenues. While these works provide important insights, they do not fully account for the cross-national convergence of gendered security tropes among adversarial States, such as the U.S., Israel, and Iran. Therefore, the problem this study addresses is twofold, first, it examines how militarized masculinities are produced and reproduced across official rhetoric, policy documents, and media coverage in the U.S./Israel and Iran crisis. Second, it evaluates the implications of these gendered narratives for conflict escalation and the marginalization of alternative security frameworks, particularly feminist and human-centered approaches. Addressing this problem fills a critical gap in both feminist IR scholarship and Middle East security studies, offering insights into the interplay between discourse, identity, and geopolitical behavior.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the construction and reproduction of gendered security narratives and militarised masculinities in the U.S.–Israel–Iran crisis.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examine how militarised masculinities are constructed in official speeches, policy documents and media coverage of the U.S.–Israel–Iran crisis;
2. examine the symbolic representation of women and children in security discourse and their role in legitimising military action; and
3. Assess how gendered security narratives influence conflict escalation and constrain alternative approaches to security.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are militarised masculinities constructed in official speeches, policy documents and media coverage of the U.S.–Israel–Iran crisis?
2. How women and children are represented in these security narratives, and in what ways do such representations legitimise military action?
3. How do gendered security narratives influence escalation and shape perceptions of alternative, non-military approaches to security?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Previous Studies

The study of gender in international security has gained increasing prominence over the past three decades, particularly through feminist interventions that challenge the masculinity assumptions underpinning traditional security studies. Feminist International Relations (IR) scholars argue that global politics is deeply structured by gendered hierarchies in which masculinity is associated with rationality, authority, and the legitimate use of force, while femininity is coded as vulnerability or passivity (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2014). This body of work highlights how war, militarization, and State security are socially constructed through gendered narratives, rather than being purely objective or material phenomena. Central to this study is the concept of militarized masculinities, as developed by Raewyn Connell (1995) and expanded in security scholarship by Sjoberg and Gentry (2015). Militarized masculinity refers to the ways in which the State performs authority through tropes of toughness, aggression, and protective dominance, normalizing violence as a legitimate tool of national survival. Militarized masculinities are often operationalized through elite discourse, including political speeches, military communiqués, and media representations, which construct threats and prescribe responses according to gendered logic (Cohn, 1987; Sharp, 2021). These narratives frequently invoke the binary of protector/protected, with men as active defenders of the nation and women positioned symbolically as vulnerable dependents (Enloe, 2000; Young, 2003).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that gendered security narratives are not static, that they evolve in response to geopolitical crises and are reproduced across ideological divides. For instance, militarized masculinities have been observed not only in U.S. post-9/11 security discourse (Parashar, 2015) but also in Middle Eastern state narratives, where protection of national honor and religious sovereignty reinforces authoritarian and militarized state practices (Sjoberg, 2013; Hudson et al., 2019). This convergence suggests that despite ideological differences, States employ similar gendered logics to justify military escalation and constrain diplomatic alternatives. Within the context of the U.S./Israel and Iran crisis, these frameworks are particularly salient. The literature indicates that official speeches, emergency declarations, and media coverage frequently frame conflict through existential threat narratives, emphasizing national survival, retaliation, and honor (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023; Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). These narratives reproduce militarized masculinity while marginalizing alternative security perspectives grounded in diplomacy, care, or human security. Contemporary studies also highlight the symbolic mobilization of women and children in conflict discourse, who are invoked as figures to legitimize force rather than as agents with political voice (Enloe, 2014; Shepherd, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Middle East-specific scholarship strengthens this analytical focus. Moghadam (2024), examining Iran–U.S. relations through a feminist IR lens, shows how sanctions, geopolitical rivalry, and women's security are interconnected and how prolonged hostility can reinforce militarized masculinities. Research on Israel likewise demonstrates that gender is embedded in military institutions and practices, including debates over women's agency and participation in state militaries (Harel, 2024). Comparative work on Israel's foreign-policy role conception also shows how gendered understandings of state identity interact with security and foreign-policy practice (Aran & Brummer, 2024). These studies support the relevance of a gendered security lens to Middle Eastern crises while leaving room for a focused cross-national analysis of U.S., Israeli, and Iranian crisis discourse.

This study therefore integrates three interrelated theoretical frameworks:

1. Feminist International Relations (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2014) – emphasizes the social construction of gender in global politics and critiques the masculinist assumptions of mainstream security studies.
2. Militarized Masculinity (Connell, 1995; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015) – focuses on the performative and discursive mechanisms through which states frame military action as an extension of masculine authority.
3. Gendered Security and Securitization Theory (Cohn, 1987; Parashar, 2015; Shepherd, 2020) examines how threat narratives and discourse shape legitimacy, constrain policy options, and influence public consent.

Combining these frameworks means that the study situates the U.S./Israel and Iran crisis within both a feminist analytical lens and contemporary security studies. It aims to uncover how militarized masculinities are performed and reinforced through State rhetoric and media narratives, and how these gendered constructions shape conflict escalation, civilian representation, and policy responses. In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of research on the intersection of gender, discourse, and global security, emphasizing that militarization is as much a narrative process as a material one.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) design grounded in feminist International Relations, examining not only what political and media texts say but how language and representations construct security problems, legitimate authority, and marginalise alternative interpretations (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2014). It draws on three categories of material published between February 2023 and March 2024: official speeches and statements by political and military leaders in the United States, Israel, and Iran; government policy documents and press releases; and mainstream and digital media coverage. Selection was purposive, focusing on texts addressing security, retaliation, protection, national survival, civilian vulnerability, or regional conflict. Data were coded thematically for recurring gendered tropes including protection, honour, retaliation, existential threat, strength, weakness, and vulnerability, with particular attention to the representation of women and children and the construction of masculine authority as the guarantor of national survival. Analysis proceeded through iterative cycles of corpus familiarisation, open coding, thematic grouping, cross-national comparison, and interpretive synthesis, with triangulation across official, policy, and media sources and cross-checking of coding decisions within the research team to improve interpretive consistency.

Results and Analysis

The analysis of official speeches, policy documents, and media coverage from the United States, Israel, and Iran reveals the systematic construction of militarized masculinities and the gendered framing of security narratives. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) Militarized Masculinity and State Authority, (2) Symbolic Representation of Women and Children (3) Gendered Justification of Escalation.

Research Question One: *How are militarised masculinities constructed in official speeches, policy documents and media coverage of the U.S.–Israel–Iran crisis?*

Table 1: Construction of Militarised Masculinities in the U.S.–Israel–Iran Crisis

S/N	Country/Context	Major Discourse Themes	Construction of Militarised Masculinity	Dominant Security Narrative
1	**United States**	Protection, defence, resolve, civilian security, responsibility	Political and state authority is constructed through the capacity to defend allies, protect civilians and demonstrate resolve against perceived threats.	Protection and responsible defence
2	**Israel**	National survival, population protection, security, military action, threat response	Masculine authority is associated with military preparedness, toughness and the ability to protect the population from immediate security threats.	Defence and national survival
3	**Iran**	National defence, sovereignty, resistance, protection, external threat	Masculine authority is constructed through resistance to external pressure, defence of sovereignty and readiness to confront perceived aggression.	Resistance and sovereign defence
4	**Media coverage**	Threat, retaliation, military strength, vulnerability, confrontation	Political and military actors are frequently represented through performances of strength and resolve, while civilians are positioned as vulnerable populations requiring protection.	Strength versus vulnerability
5	**Cross-national pattern**	Strength, protection, retaliation, national responsibility	Across the three contexts, militarised masculinity links effective political authority with the capacity to confront threats and protect the nation or population.	The state as protector

Source: Analysis of official speeches, policy documents and media coverage examined in the study, February 2023–March 2024.

Table 1 shows that militarised masculinities are constructed across the United States, Israel, Iran, and media coverage through a shared logic equating political authority with the capacity to confront threats, demonstrate resolve, and provide protection. The U.S. emphasises responsible defence, Israel stresses military preparedness and national survival, and Iran centres on resistance and sovereign defence. Despite differing vocabularies, all reproduce a common gendered architecture in which strength is coded as masculine and legitimate, while vulnerability is feminised and positioned as requiring masculine protection. Media coverage reinforces this by representing leaders through performances of strength and civilians as vulnerable populations. The cross-national pattern reveals militarised masculinity as a recurring discursive resource linking effective authority to threat confrontation and national protection, reproducing the state as the ultimate masculine protector.

RQ2: *How are women and children represented in these security narratives, and in what ways do such representations legitimise military action?*

Table 2: Representation of Women and Children in the U.S.–Israel–Iran Crisis Discourse

S/N	Country/ Context	Dominant Representation of Women and Children	Legitimation Mechanism	Gendered Logic	Dominant Security Narrative
1	**United States**	Women and children as innocent civilians requiring protection from terrorism; "our" vulnerable at home and abroad	Moral responsibility of the protector; retaliation framed as justice and rescue	Paternalistic protection; global guardian masculinity	Protection and responsible defence
2	**Israel**	Women and children as population under existential threat; hostages as symbol of violated nation and violated domestic sphere	National survival; retaliation as restoration of deterrence and honour	Fortress masculinity; protection as national duty and collective responsibility	Defence and national survival
3	**Iran**	Women and children as victims of external aggression; sovereignty framed as protective shield for the vulnerable	Resistance; retaliation as defence of honour, sovereignty and national dignity	Resistance masculinity; protection as anti-imperialist and sovereign duty	Resistance and sovereign defence
4	**Media coverage**	Women and children as emotional icons; suffering bodies as visual shorthand for conflict; vulnerability as spectacle	Emotional mobilisation; simplification of complex geopolitics into protection narrative	Spectacular vulnerability; protection as visual and emotional spectacle	Strength versus vulnerability

5	**Cross-national pattern**	Women and children consistently positioned as symbolic victims rather than political agents; their vulnerability invoked to justify military action across all three states	The protector–protected binary transforms military action into moral necessity and restraint into moral failure	Militarised masculinity requires feminine vulnerability as its moral anchor; protection legitimises escalation	The state as protector

Source: Analysis of official speeches, policy documents and media coverage examined in the study, February 2023–March 2024.

Table 2 shows that women and children are represented across the United States, Israel, Iran, and media coverage primarily as symbolic victims whose vulnerability legitimises military action. The U.S. frames them as innocent civilians needing protection from terrorism, Israel as a population under existential threat, and Iran as victims of external aggression shielded by sovereign resistance. Media coverage reduces them to emotional icons and spectacles of suffering. Despite differing vocabularies, all reproduce the protector–protected binary in which women and children are objects of protection rather than political agents, transforming military action into moral necessity and restraint into moral failure. The cross-national pattern confirms that gendered security narratives are systemic features of militarised statecraft.

Table 3: Gendered Security Narratives, Escalation, and Constraint of Alternatives in the U.S.–Israel–Iran Crisis

S/N	Country/ Context	Escalation Logic	Gendered Coding of Restraint	Constraint on Alternatives	Dominant Security Narrative
1	**United States**	Retaliation framed as responsible defence of allies and civilians; strength as global leadership	Diplomacy coded as appeasement; restraint as failure of resolve	Human security and diplomacy marginalised; military response framed as only credible option	Protection and responsible defence
2	**Israel**	Escalation framed as necessary for national survival and deterrence restoration	Ceasefire coded as capitulation; restraint as existential risk	Diplomacy perceived as rewarding terrorism; alternatives constrained by survival logic	Defence and national survival

3	**Iran**	Retaliation framed as resistance to aggression and defence of sovereignty	Negotiation coded as submission; restraint as weakness against imperial pressure	Diplomatic alternatives constrained by resistance narrative; sovereignty framed as non-negotiable	Resistance and sovereign defence
4	**Media coverage**	Escalation amplified through spectacle of strength and vulnerability; emotional mobilisation	Diplomacy represented as ineffective or naive; restraint as passive	Alternative frameworks invisible; conflict simplified into moral binary of strength vs weakness	Strength versus vulnerability
5	**Cross-national pattern**	Gendered honour–retaliation cycles drive escalation across all three states; protection imperative makes de-escalation appear as betrayal	Restraint feminised and delegitimised; diplomacy coded as weakness	Non-military approaches constrained by gendered logic of strength, honour, and protection	The state as protector

Source: Analysis of official speeches, policy documents and media coverage examined in the study, February 2023–March 2024.

Table 3 shows that gendered security narratives drive escalation and constrain alternatives across the United States, Israel, Iran, and media coverage through a shared logic. In the U.S., retaliation is framed as responsible defence while diplomacy is coded as appeasement; in Israel, escalation is framed as necessary for survival while ceasefire is coded as capitulation; and in Iran, retaliation is framed as resistance while negotiation is coded as submission. Media coverage amplifies this by reducing complex geopolitics to a moral binary of strength versus vulnerability. Across all contexts, restraint is feminised and delegitimised, while honour–retaliation cycles and the protection imperative make de-escalation appear as betrayal. Non-military approaches are rendered invisible or illegitimate, confirming that gendered security narratives are systemic features of militarised statecraft that narrow policy imagination and sustain escalation.

Discussion of findings

The findings presented in Table 1 confirm that militarised masculinities are constructed across the United States, Israel, Iran, and media coverage through a shared discursive logic equating political authority with the capacity to confront threats, demonstrate resolve, and provide protection. This aligns with Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Sjoberg and Gentry's (2015) work on militarised masculinity, which argue that state authority is performed through tropes of toughness, retaliation, and protective dominance. The cross-national convergence observed despite adversarial positions supports Tickner's (1992) and Enloe's (2014) feminist IR contention that global politics is structured through gendered hierarchies that transcend ideological divides, while also echoing Cohn's (1987) analysis of how defence

discourse normalises violence through techno-strategic language. Table 2 demonstrates that women and children are represented primarily as symbolic victims whose vulnerability legitimises military action, reproducing the protector–protected binary central to feminist security scholarship (Enloe, 2014; Young, 2003). This representation confirms Parashar's (2015) and Shepherd's (2020) arguments that gendered securitisation constructs threats through feminine vulnerability while prescribing masculine protection as the only legitimate response. The structural absence of women as political agents, despite their symbolic centrality, reflects the marginalisation documented by Hudson et al. (2019) and Moghadam (2024), and underscores the gap between WPS normative commitments and actual policy practice. Table 3 reveals that gendered security narratives drive escalation through honour–retaliation cycles while constraining alternatives by feminising restraint and coding diplomacy as weakness. This supports Sjoberg's (2013) feminist theory of war, which argues that militarised masculinity requires ongoing escalation to sustain its performative authority, and Sharp's (2021) work on how gendered scripts narrow perceived policy options. The cross-national pattern identified across all three tables confirms that gendered security narratives are not culturally specific but systemic features of militarised statecraft, as argued by Enloe (2000) and Sjoberg and Thies (2023), thereby validating the study's integrated theoretical framework combining feminist IR, militarised masculinity, and gendered securitisation theory.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that militarised masculinities and gendered security narratives are constitutive of the U.S.–Israel–Iran crisis, constructing state authority through protection, driving escalation through honour–retaliation cycles, and constraining alternatives by feminising restraint and marginalising diplomacy. The cross-national convergence of these mechanisms across adversarial states confirms that gendered security narratives are systemic features of militarised statecraft, not culturally specific phenomena. Understanding these dynamics is essential for challenging escalation and opening space for inclusive, human-centred security frameworks in one of the world's most volatile geopolitical arenas.

Recommendations

This study draws three recommendations based on the research findings:

1. Integrate gender-sensitive analysis into security policymaking: Governments should systematically apply feminist IR and gendered securitisation frameworks to assess how security narratives construct threats, legitimise military action, and constrain diplomatic alternatives, ensuring that protection rhetoric does not automatically translate into escalation.
2. Promote inclusive decision-making and genuine WPS implementation: All three states should move beyond symbolic invocations of women and children by ensuring women's substantive participation in high-level security decision-making, thereby disrupting the protector–protected binary and opening space for alternative, human-centred approaches.
3. Challenge militarised masculinities through media literacy and public discourse: Media outlets, civil society, and educational institutions should expose how gendered narratives frame restraint as weakness and diplomacy as betrayal, fostering public awareness that enables democratic oversight and supports non-military conflict resolution.

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